

**Diagnosing the Workplace:**  
**Noob Paratroopers Behind Enemy Lines**  
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## Noob Paratroopers Behind Enemy Lines

The first time I opened my classroom door and faced the complete unknown of having my first class of my own, I felt like I was a paratrooper dropping in behind enemy lines. While standing in the door of my portable I met the other rookie 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, who was also standing at her door waiting to receive her students. In the five-minutes that it took our respective classes to line up, I'd introduced myself to the other teacher, found out that she liked Math, whereas I liked History and we decided to team-teach those subjects. That one little decision, to connect with another paratrooper made just before we jumped into the great unknown, probably did the most good to contribute towards the both of us surviving our first year behind enemy lines. *Good description. I like the metaphor. To play the academic game, after you give the illustration, label it. Refer to this as a example of something, in this case, peer-to-peer interaction that L&W describe as part of the legitimate learning in a community.*

Before I faced that first class I'd already spent years in training for that day as a long-term and daily substitute, student teacher and classroom volunteer. My methods classes at Chapman University had covered the curriculum, multiple modes of addressing my room full of learners and basic classroom management. All that said, there was no comparing what I'd "practiced for" with the real thing. As such it is only now, upon reflection that I can really appreciate how valuable it was for me to have that other rookie paratrooper in the other room to team with. I was lucky that way. *This is a good place to reference the 'identity' part of the CoP model. There is such a difference*

*between the identity we think we are seeking as we stand and look in to the practice, and what it's really like from the inside.*

In the summer 2004, as part of his introduction session in our leadership class, Dr. Vance Caesar shared a story from his youth about a time when he tried to get the secret of success from the father of a friend and mostly succeeded in irritating the father because he was unable to appreciate the advice this man was giving him. The man told Caesar that the secret to his success was the relationships he had built over the years. Caesar took that to heart and it served him well. I fell into it by chance and by social disposition. There was no forethought or intention to build a CoP in order to survive those first years (and actually, all the years since then) but it's been a natural approach to doing the work of education for me. *I think that's part of the theory that gets missed. CoPs are naturally occurring things people generally do to make sense and get by in daily life. When we try to formalize this process we often screw it up. School is a great example. It's so hard for school, as normally structured, to provide for the interactional flexibility and communication flow that a good CoP has.* Today, as new teachers join our staff I'm curious about their means of support. How do they go from being the campus noob to trusted colleague to grade level or site level leader? This paper will briefly look at the school site, its staff, and the observations of a few of its newest members on surviving their first years at Mark Twain Elementary.

Data: Setting

Mark Twain Elementary sits in a suburban track of North Long Beach that calls itself Lakewood Village. A couple blocks north of Long Beach City College, the campus has a park and middle school as one neighbor with churches and comfortable single-family homes as the others. Green lawns and plenty of shady trees surround the campus itself.

I came to this campus as a computer lab teacher and site technology coordinator in the Fall of 2001 as the school was in the midst of competing for its second prestigious award. Mark Twain Elementary ended up receiving recognition as a 2002 California Distinguished School, having received recognition as a U.S. Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in 1999 (Long Beach Unified School District, 2004).



Thus this school and its record of excellence stood in sharp contrast to the school I had served at for six years. In two papers written during my OMAET program I compared the two schools on the basis of leadership, teamwork, technology, professionalism and morale. Briefly, I'd come to the conclusion that it wasn't a matter of the work ethic of the teachers and most definitely not a matter of which school had the larger investment in technology. The administrative leadership, the level of community and parental involvement and the staff's expectation to succeed seem to be the largest differences between this campus and my former school (Bustillos, 2001, Bustillos, 2002)

Data: Personnel

Out of a teaching staff of 43, one-fourth or 13 have been teaching less than 15-years. That is also about the same ratio of teachers who have been teaching at Twain for less than five-years: one-fourth or 12 teachers. For six of the 43 teachers teaching is a second career.

Grade levels tend to work together as CoPs, generally offering one another informal assistance and a sense of student and teacher expectations (for the purposes of this analysis I've grouped the Special Day Classes as one "grade level" and Special Services such as RSP, computer lab & speech as another "grade level"). The ratio of "veteran" staff member to "newcomer" is 5-to-2 or better in six of the eight grade levels. Over the past four years I have noticed that there has tended to be a natural pairing of "newcomer" with "veteran" in most grade levels with little or no orchestration by the administration. (see Appendix A).

- *Love the images. Great data.*

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#### Data: Physical Infrastructure

Mark Twain Elementary is the first K-5 school

I've known where its campus is split down the middle by a busy street. A concrete footbridge, needed to manage the heavy daily traffic from one side to the other side of the campus, joins the two parts of the campus over the street.

The west side of the campus houses grades K through second, the library, RSP, Speech, cafeteria, auditorium and office. The east side of the campus houses grades three through five and the computer lab. The majority of the 20 classrooms on the west side are part of the U-shaped two





wings of the original school buildings designed in a “mission style” (buildings A & B) with four portables set out behind the cafeteria near the west side playground. This year four of the six second-grade classrooms occupy the portables *Sometimes physical spaces/architecture create communities. Do you have two subcultures here on this campus? I wouldn't be surprised..*

On the east side there are also two buildings in an L-shape (buildings C & D). Of the 20 classrooms on this side of the campus seven are housed in portables. Three of the four fifth grade classes, three of the four fourth grade classes and one third grade classroom occupy the east side portables.

#### Observation: Facing the Wrong Direction

##### & Asking Today's Paratroopers

When I began this study I was a little too literal and looked for the relationship between how the teachers support one another in general and the layout of the physical buildings/classrooms and whether grade levels were in adjacent classrooms. Needless to say, my observations were inconclusive and tended to confuse the intent of my focus. Thus, I decide to interview four teachers new to Mark Twain in order to get a sense of how they see themselves supported as new teachers. *Great initiative.*

Spending most of my working week on the east side I am most familiar with the working relationships of the teachers on this side of the school and chose to speak with the two new fifth grade teachers, the 4/5 literacy teacher and a fourth grade teacher. Besides the four I interviewed, there are three second-grade teachers, one kindergarten teacher and two third-grade teachers who have come to Mark Twain in the past five years.

New is a relative term. Fifth-grade teacher, Stacy Haraldson, is beginning her second year at Twain but this is her ninth year teaching in this school district. When she moved from her prior school she also changed grade levels from second to fifth. Because of how long she's been with the district she is ineligible for the two-years of support the district gives new teachers to acclimate them to their grade level's curriculum (which usually includes an onsite mentor to work with). Thus she has to depend on her grade level partners to help her with the new curriculum. Unfortunately her grade level is the one grade level with the greatest ratio of "newcomers" to veteran teachers, two for two. Add to that, the teacher Haraldson replaced left Twain because he felt like he couldn't work with the other fifth grade teachers and they largely seemed to feel that there was no real need to work together. Thus Haraldson generally has found herself working with the other newcomer fifth grade teacher, Lori Primrose. But because Primrose is teaching a GATE class the match isn't exact. Understandably I get no sense from Haraldson that she feels like she's part of a CoP. *It's probably worth pondering the extent to which the practice itself is responsible for some of its own problems. That is, do teachers come to believe that teaching is a solo activity? That seeking and giving help, cooperating or even collaborating together is NOT part of "who we are" and "what we do here?"*

Lori Primrose, the other new fifth-grade teacher, is one of the few "new teachers" who is actually new to teaching. After working 10 years at Boeing in Seal Beach she decided to return to school to get her degree in Liberal Studies and to teach. Her children are students at Twain and after completing her student teaching she was able to get a long term substitute position last year filling in for a fifth grade GATE teacher. Sadly that teacher passed away from her illness and Primrose was chosen to fill the position. So, besides this being her first full-year teaching, she found herself having to follow a well-liked teacher and teaching the GATE class. Now,

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**Comment:** Bing! This is worthy of note and description as a formal effort to help newbies through the 'induction years' (I'm assuming this is a BITS program). At any rate, it's worth noting what it is that the district (or someone) has decided is useful knowledge for newbies. What does that tell you about the practice community? About the practice? How well does the induction program succeed in helping newbies advance? What is the next available support system to take people from intermediate to advanced?

because she really is a new teacher she has been getting the district's "Essential Elements" training, as well as strategies of math and Open Court training. She also has an onsite mentor. Her mentor is the third-grade GATE teacher (who is beginning her third year at Twain). This means that Primrose is getting support in GATE-things, but not necessarily in things related to fifth-grade curriculum. Primrose tried to put it tactfully that, because of a different in philosophies about education and "personalities," there really is no new teacher support within the grade-level as far as there being a working Community of Practice. *Mentoring is a very different idea. Remember in L&W where they talked about their reluctance to use the term "apprenticeship" because of its historical definition as a 1:1 sort of experience? That would be good to mention here. (p 62-63 ish) Mentoring is that 1:1 experience as well. You are then limited by the relationship and the knowledge/expertise of the particular person you have been paired with.*

The literacy teacher (4/5 combo), Karen Burtch, has also had her children attend Twain and is also in her first year with her own class teaching at Twain. Prior to this she taught P.E. for seven-years in a private school and then spent four years subbing and getting her teaching credential. She is also getting the district's Essential Elements training and added support for her literacy program. Unfortunately because she has a combination class she doesn't have a grade level mentor but has the school site person as her coach. And being essentially a "grade-level" of one, she feels that there is no CoP for her to be a part of.

Fourth grade teacher, Holly Huber, said that she came into teaching having seen a lot of good and bad examples as a student aide at a local school where her mom teaches and as a substitute teacher for two-years. She's been at Twain, which was her first assignment, for five years. When she came in she was paired with another fourth grade teacher as her mentor for the

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**Comment:** Again, it would be good to have a description AND a critique of this as a CoP support.



first two years, in addition to the Essential Elements training and the Math and Language Arts curriculum training. She felt that the mentoring was a little "unstructured," and since then has tended to work a little more closely with another of the fourth grade teachers whose sense of organization and structure work for her. In this case Huber actually has three fourth grade teachers to work with and, depending on the situation or need, she feels perfectly at home working with any of them. Here is a case where these four fourth grade teachers have found a workable sense of cooperation and teamwork. In terms of Huber coming in as the one needing mentoring and having a more peripheral level of participation, she has most definitely gained acceptance as a full participant in the group.

Were I to include the seven third-grade teachers in my observations and how their two "newcomers" come to access the practice, the natural pairing with a more veteran teacher tends to fulfill that need. But at the same time the "newcomers" do come with their own unique experiences and those experiences are more than welcomed by the group. This lends itself to a sense that all the members of the team are equal and there are no barriers to full inclusion or participation. Just as with Huber with the other fourth grade teachers, this is a self-selecting self-reproducing process.

### Conclusions

This is admittedly a cursory look at a social dynamic between this small group of teachers. But even as such a couple things seem clear to me. The first is that this district is doing a respectable job trying to provide its rookie teachers with opportunities to work with the tools they've selected, the curriculum and essential elements. And an effort is made to pair new teachers with mentors to help them with the other aspects of what it means to be a classroom

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**Comment:** The value or return that newbies offer the community is exactly this fresh perspective. Newbie variations on practice are the main source of innovation/change in the practice, along with the harsher forces of change in the general landscape within which the practice is conducted (eg policy shifts, new technologies). To embrace newbie 'fresh eyes' is to reinvigorate the practice in more controllable and compatible ways than to be forever reacting to outside forces. This is the sort of comment I would expect you to make in the description.

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**Comment:** What is the basis for your assessment of respectability, e.g., do new teachers seem to do a better job after the experience?

teacher. But even still what seems to be missing is an understanding of the importance of an ongoing cooperative relationship between classroom teachers that goes far beyond just making sure that the noobs don't fall apart in the first few minutes of their careers as educators. Clearly, for me and for the teachers I spoke with, these constructive mentoring or teaming relationships were instrumental in surviving one's first few days and months being the rookie paratrooper dropped behind enemy lines. But they also make for good practice after one has gone beyond

being another scared but eager noob. *Any connections to the larger teacher practice? Eg, through the union or through organizations such as ASCD or NEA or Calif League of Middle Schools (<http://www.clms.net/>), etc?*

*Better descriptions. Hope the comments continue to help you improve your doc'l writing. I need more connection to theory. Your personal and local experience does serve as an example or a case, but you have to detail what it's a case of or an example of.*

*B+*

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**Comment:** Again, I'm left to wonder if this isn't a problem in the profession at large.

## Appendix A

Twain Classroom teachers listed by grade level

Grade	Age			Gender		Years Teaching		Years at Twain	
	30s	40s	50s	F	M	>15	<15	>5	<5
5 <sup>th</sup>	0	3	1	3	1	2	2	2	2
4 <sup>th</sup>	1	2	1	4	0	2	2	3	1
3 <sup>rd</sup>	2	4	1	7	0	5	2	5	2
2 <sup>nd</sup>	0	7	0	7	0	7	0	5	2
1 <sup>st</sup>	0	5	2	7	0	6	1	5	2
K	1	5	0	6	0	5	1	5	1
SDC	2	2	0	4	0	1	3	4	0
Spec. Serv.	0	4	0	3	1	2	2	2	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>12</b>

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